

Challenging the Consensus' and re-discovery of forgotten Silent cinema histories - Sugeeth Krishnamoorthy

Presented at the IFFT 16th Edition Seminar, held at St.Thomas College, Trichur. 23rd March, 2021

Abstract - The need to make accessible online 'out-of-copyright' documents of British India, to further research in South Indian Silent cinema. A pamphlet was discovered in London – what is its connection to Trichur, a small town located in Kerala?

A few years ago, George Kalandia, Director of the Art Palace of Georgia, discovered a very interesting pamphlet of a Silent Era Film, in the London Museum. This discovery has a significance to three aspects which, we shall discuss in this seminar/paper -

1. Public Domain and Open Access.
2. Study and Research of 'South Indian Silent Cinema'.
3. It's connection to 'Madras' and 'Trichur'.

Copyright and Open Access – 'Copyright' is a globally accepted practice of providing a right of temporary ownership to its creator and is a source of financial encouragement to any created art forms (or) literary works. This could include Sound Recordings, Movies, Literary texts, Derived works (Translations), Text Lyrics, Musical compositions etc. During the period, in which copyright continues to exist for the created work, the original author/ creator has the right to allow commercial exploitation (or) assign the rights of the work to a publisher, who may obtain the same, by paying the author, a certain license fee (or) royalties, or both.

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Traditionally Copyright works **geographically**. Each country or region may have its own set of copyright laws, and the publishing/commercial exploitation of these art works, may vary depending on the local set of copyright laws, specific to a particular region.

In the older analog era, this could create a situation, where a larger creator and his publisher, may find it commercially unviable to publish/display their created work, in a specific region, because of the commercial unviability of the product. This may be either due to reasons of Geography (poor logistics/poor exhibition infrastructure) or may even be due to political reasons (some countries may not be in a calm political situation, to facilitate distribution of a completed art form).

Under such circumstances, an individual who may have been interested in viewing/reading/accessing a particular literary work/art form, could very much be denied Access, under the old Copyright system, for reasons, beyond their control.

Public Domain – Once the ‘copyright’ period of a work expires, the work automatically transitions into the Open Domain. From this point, neither the author/creator nor their heirs, past publisher or current publishers have any rights to prevent sharing of this work (or) prevent creation of derived works (translations etc), subject to the clearance of ‘copyright’ as per a country’s Copyright laws.

In India, the copyright of film, as per the Indian Copyright Act, and its subsequent amendment in the year 2012, for example is 60 years. 60 Years after a films release, the film automatically lapses into the ‘public space’. For eg a Film which was produced and released in 1950, automatically lapses its copyright and enters the public domain in 2010. At this point, anyone in the public have the right to share the film, and anyone can access the film. Technically, neither the producer or the rights holder have a right to interfere, in this process¹.

How Does ‘Public Domain and Open Access’ benefit Silent Cinema Research:- The period of South Indian Silent cinema, is between 1915 and 1935. All of mainstream Silent cinema which happened in South India, took place between this period, beginning with Nataraja Mudaliar’s Keechaka Vatham (Indian Cinema Film Company) and ending with C.V.Raman’s Vishnu Leela (National Theatres Limited, Madras). Close to 100 years have lapsed, in the time period of our interest.

¹ There have been some cases, where rights holders have interfered with this process, and the matter was taken up in the court. The restoration of the film Kalpana(1948) and the legal proceedings which followed is one example.

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While the copyright of these Silent films have invariably expired, the Copyright of the created works and contemporary literary works, too should more or less be in a similar situation. More over, the publications which carried and published these works, have more or less, ceased to exist. Barring Aurora Film Corporation, Calcutta, there is no longer any formal organization which was involved in the promotion of the Silent cinemas (Film Production/Film Magazines/Pamphlets creation etc), which continues to exist today. So, a lot of these works no longer raise any monetary benefit, to the original copyright holder (or) their heirs, even it was still in copyright.

In such circumstances, considering that most of these film reels are lost, and the chances of finding and restoring them continue to wane – the aligned media i.e Periodicals, Newspapers, Pamphlets, Published Books and any supporting print (or) media, become a major source of primary information to further research in the Silent Film era. These can and should be shared online, for the benefit of students and researchers, who are interested in challenging established consenses around Silent Cinema studies and also re-discovering any forgotten information, around this period. This should be made online, and provide any interested individual – equal opportunities of 'Access' and 'Contribution'. The Digital World and the 'Internet', have made this perfectly possible.

Challenging the Consensus - 'Marthanda Varma' (P.V.Rao) was not censored -

'Marthanda Varma' is a film, which was directed by P.V.Rao, for Rajeswari films, Nagercoil, in the early 1930s. The film was based on a novel written by C.V.Raman Pillai, and at the time of making of the film, the rights to the literary work, were being held by *Kamalalaya Book Depot* – the book publisher, of the novel.

The producer of the film version - Sundara Raj, had failed to take the rights from *Kamalalaya Book Depot* before making the film (based on the novel), and at the time of the film's release, the book publishers obtained an injunction in court, preventing the film's release. The court ordered the seizure of the film's reels, and ordered them to be deposited in Kamalalaya Book Depot's custody.

The reels continued to languish in Kamalalaya Book depot's office for several decades, in a poorly maintained condition, until it was rescued several by P.K.Nair and Adoor Gopalakrishnan in the early 1970s. The print was then brought to N.F.A.I, Pune, repaired, restored and has now been digitized. The digitized version of the film (Copyright status : now in public domain) is available online. Most of this story has already been established in the public space.

'Mathanda Varma was not censored' - Several pioneers (film archivists, film makers, historians) etc have argued in favour that the film version 'Marthanda Varma', was not censored.

'Late' P.K.Nair, the man who was responsible for saving the print of Marthanda Varma' in the first place, goes on record and says - 'We checked up the censor records and found that this film

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(Marthanda Varma) was not in the censor records. **That means, that the film was not even censored²**

Several important personalities, like Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Virchand Dharamsey and Suresh Chabria, who have made immense contributions to research and findings around Indian Silent cinema, in their book - ‘Light of Asia’ provide similar sentiments - ‘And **had it** (Marthanda Varma) **been submitted for censorship**, some of the titles with their indirect reference to the national movement would probably have led to difficulties, as well³’.

Film Historian S.Theodore Baskaran, once connected this author to a senior Malayalam film maker, who was involved with the resurrection of the print of ‘Marthanda Varma’ in the 1970s. The film maker expressed similar views, citing that Travancore state did not have a censor board around the point of the film’s release, and there fore, there was no possibility of the film Marthanda Varma, having been censored.

To a large extent, there now exists a consensus, around ‘Marthanda Varma’ not having being censored.

Challenging a consensus:- Can a popularly acception notion with regard to film history, for several decades, be challenged? A consensus around film history can be challenged under the following circumstances, if answers to the following questions are available.

1. What is the contrary claim?
2. What is the evidence to substantiate the claim?
3. Is the evidence reliable?
4. Is the evidence available in ‘the open space’ for it to be cross examined by other individuals/ researchers, and therefore emerge at a common consensus, in re-writing portions of film history

The role and contribution of Film Historians and Activists like P.K.Nair, Suresh Chabria, Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Virchand Dharamsey, S.Theodore Baskaran, S.Krishnaswamy etc are immense. Their narratives should be treated correctly, up and until newer forms of concrete evidence emerge, that can contest some of these narratives, atleast as far as ‘Study around Silent cinema’ goes.

The words of R.Balakrishnan, archaologist, Keezhadi excavations are particularly important in this context - ‘History should be re-written, based on emerging newer evidences and imporantly, it

2 ‘Celluloid Man’ – A film on P.K.Nair, made by Shivendra Singh Dungarpur.

3 ‘Light of Asia’ - Indian Silent Cinema 1912 – 1934, edited by Suresh Chabria.

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should be contested and challenged, and when a new consensus emerges, then subsequent portions of the history, should be re-written, and the process should continue'

Marthanda Varma was censored, twice :- By the late 1920s, a large number of films were being produced and exhibited in Madras Presidency, Bombay Presidency, Calcutta etc. This made a lot of sense of the local governments to have a dedicated Censor Board and a formal censoring process.

However, the Travancore state being a much smaller one, did not have the bandwidth to have a dedicated board, for this process. However, this does not imply that Travancore did not censor films, which were being screened locally. Indeed, this was done, but it was the job, which was assigned to the Police Department of Travancore.

Each film which was exhibited in Travancore had to be submitted to the local police, along with an reference certificate of censorship, which had previously been cleared by other Censor Boards. The police would examine the film, and issue a new Travancore certificate, along with a dedicated Travancore Censor certified number.

The details of the newly issued censor certificate, would then be published by the Travancore Police department in the government gazette. Depending on the emergence of the next film for censorship (which could possibly take weeks), the process would be repeated, and the censor details of the next subsequent films, permitted to be screened in Travancore, would be published in subsequent gazette editions.

The first film censored in Travancore was a film titled 'Speed King'. The film was 5000 feet in length, and was originally censored in Bombay. The censor certificate issued by Travancore Police was Certificate number 1. The Censor Certificate issued to Vikathakumaran by Travancore Censor Board (Travancore National Pictures) was number 63.

The gazette notifications of the period publish details in both English and Malayalam. The notifications around the issuance of these Censor certificates bear Malayalam Calendar dates. For instance, certificate number 97 and 98, were issued to Sundara Raj of Rajeswari Films, Nagercoil, for the film 'Marthanda Varma' and the 'Birthday Procession of the King'. The film's length was 12,000 feet and 1000 feet respectively. The issue of these certificate, is dated based on the Malayalam calendar. (2nd Edavom 1108, approximately translates to May, 1933.)

NOTIFICATION.

Certificates Nos. 97 and 98, dated 2nd Edavom 1108 of 1108 have been issued from the Travancore Board of Film Censors to Mr. R. Sundra Raj, Proprietor of Sri Rajeswari Film Co., Nagercoil, for the films entitled "Marthanda Varma" and "20th Birthday Procession of H. H. The Maharaja of Travancore", with a length of 12,000 feet and 1000 feet respectively, produced from the Sri Rajeswari Film Co., Nagercoil.

(By order)

A. PALPU,
Manager.

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Around October 1933, the Police Department published a consolidated Censor list of 130 films (Travancore Censor Certificate 1 to 130). VikathaKumaran at 7000 feet, is originally Censored at Travancore was issued censor Certificate number 63, and Marthanda Varma (and the Birthday Procession) whose censor details had been notified a few months prior, retain the original censor certificate numbers 97 and 98.

The Second consolidated Censor Certificate List :- Around November 1935, the Police Department issued another consolidated list of censored films, in Travancore. This list contains the details of around 191 films. The original details are retained, but the Certificate numbering standardization is altered slightly. Vikathakumaran is issued new certificate number 63/08 (original certificate number 63), Marthanda Varma is issued Certificate number 97/08 (original 97) and the Birthday Procession is issued Certificate 98/08(Original 98). There are certificate details of other films, issued with denominators /09 and /10 and /11, as well, possibly referring to the Malayalam year, on which the original certificate had been issued (or first consolidated).

21	Birthday procession of H. H. the Maharaja of Travancore	98/08	Travancore	1000
130	Marthanda Varma	97/08	Travancore	12000

The presence of these documents in the Travancore gazette, create an opportunity for us, to challenge the notion, that the film Marthanda Varma, was not censored. These documents can be re-accessed by experts and a discussion around the film censoring process of Travancore state in the 1930s, will help us establish the actual facts of the case.

A Forgotten film pioneer: Most of the documented histories of the Silent period of South Indian films, mention some very popular names, which include Raghupathi Venkiah, Raghupathi Prakasa, Swamikannu Vincent, P.K.Raja Sandow, J.C. Daniel, Y.V.Rao, Jithen Bannerjee, K.T.Rukmini etc. However, there are individuals who are sparsely recalled like 'Thomas Huffton' of Peninsular Film Services, or individuals like T.G.Lalvani and K.A.Davies, whose roles in the Silent film period, have totally been forgotten.

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Most historians who have spoken of the history of the Associated Films (Silent Film Production company/Madras) place as default, P.K.Raja Sandow as the director of all the films produced by the company. This is factually untrue. While it is indeed true that Raja Sandow was involved in the early films made by the company (Rajeswari, Orphan Girl etc), Sandow left the company mid-way on the arrival of the talkies.

His replacement was one T.G.Lalvani, who had returned from London, after a training course in film making. T.G.Lalvani and P.V.Rao (of Marthanda Varma fame) were involved in the remaining period of the company, post Raja Sandow’s leaving, and were involved in the creation and direction of several other films (including the last film BhakthaVatsala⁴(1931)).

A similar forgotten individual who has been forgotten from the annals of South Indian Silent cinema is a financier/banker, who financed the ‘General Pictures Corporation’. Kunhappu Anthony Davies and his elder brother Kunhappu Anthony Francis come from a wealthy Syrian Christian family in Trichur. A lawyer by profession in Madras, Davies left Madras to travel back to his home town Trichur, to continue practicing his legal profession. It is in the mid 1920s, that the Kunhappu brothers, set up a touring cinema that travelled around Cochin and Travancore states. Davies seems to have been connected with multiple film production/distribution companies around India, from where, he sourced film prints, for exhibition in his theatre.

With growing wealth, Davies, in conjunction with several other well to do individuals of Trichur, start investing in a series of chit funds and banking institutions of Trichur, some institutions, which remain to this day.

It is around this time, that Aurora Film corporation decides to film the Congress session to be held in Madras. Aurora gets in touch with A.Narayanan (who had started his career under K.D.Bros and Co, and had dabbled in multiple roles as a cinema exhibitor, distributor, etc), who was then running a small distribution firm called Narayanan&Co. Aurora sends Jithen Bannerjee as a part of the entourage to film the session, and the filming is done successfully. The speed of filming and post-processing was such that in about a week, the completed footage of the event pictured in Madras, was censored in Calcutta⁵.

A popular thread that has been documented in A.Narayanan’s life is that, he was the first individual to take a print of an Indian film (Anarkali) abroad to expand the financial scope of exhibiting Indian films, globally. Narayanan returned from the U.S to found ‘General Pictures Corporation’ and its distribution arm - ‘Exhibitors Film Service’. This has been well documented, off course.

4 Virchand Dharamsey mentions P.K.Raja Sandow as the Director of the film Bhakthavatsala. This is untrue. There is enough primary documentation of the 1930s, to prove that T.G.Lalvani made the film. During this time, Raja Sandow was in Bombay, making Hindi Talkie films for the Imperial Film Company.

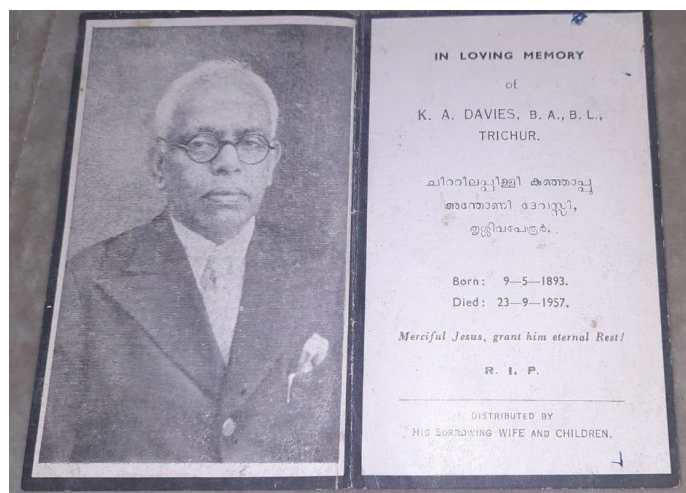
5 The 42nd Session of Indian National Congress and the All-India Agricultural, Industrial and Khaddi exhibition, Madras – Applicant – Aurora Cinema Co – 2900 feet – Calcutta Censor Certificate Date 9-1-28. Certificate Number 9140.

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But what has been forgotten is that the capital required for the firm was provided by the ‘Kunhappu Brothers’. They were the sole proprietors of ‘Exhibitors Film Service’, while A.Narayanan was the General Manager of the firm. Along with a couple of other individuals, the ‘Kunhappu’ brothers Francis and Davies, feature on the board of the ‘General Pictures Corporation’ as well.



Image Credit – internetarchive.org



K.A.Davies – Image Credit – Cheriyan Joseph Kanchiraparampan.

Post the dissolution of the ‘General Pictures Corporation’, there are possibilities that the lives of A.Narayanan and K.A.Davies may still have been in touch, when A.Narayanan made his early Talkie film ‘Sakkubai’ in Calcutta, at Aurora film corporation. The scope of these communications needs to be researched further⁶.

Later K.A.Davies and his brother K.A.Francis were involved in a series of local welfare institutions, which included the founding of a printing press called Kshemodayam Press (Welfare Press). Kshemodayam Press was involved in the publication of vernacular magazines titled ‘Sadhu’ and ‘Sudinam’. Much of what happened in Davies’s later, as far as the film world goes, remains unclear. Davies passed away in the year 1957.

6 Journeys in and Beyond the City: Cinema in Calcutta 1897 – 1939 – Ranita Chatterjee.

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The availability of documents through online sources like 'The National Archives of India', 'The Singapore Library Board', 'internetarchive.org' has helped us discover details of a forgotten film pioneers – Kunhappu Davies and Kunhappu Francis, whose roles in institution building are immense. K.A.Davies continues to be remembered in the growth and development of Trichur to this day, in local historical recollections. Sadly, his role and contributions to the growth of Silent cinema, in India, have largely been forgotten, at a much larger level.

It is very much possible that if the 'Kunhappu Brothers' had not invested financial Capital in 'General Pictures Corporation', the company may never have formed in the first place. In sheer volume of films produced, GPC (General Pictures Corporation) is the second largest Silent film studio of South India, after *Surya Film Company*, Bangalore. GPC produced close to 20 films, in its life span of around 3 years. Therefore, the role of financial investors like K.A.Davies needs to be brought to the forefront, when we write the history of our silent films, as well.

Connection to the Pamphlet : *General Pictures Corporation* was very successful in its first year of incorporation. It continued to make films, at an average of a *film per month*. However, time was running out. It is an irony that while South Indian Silent cinema was peaking at around 1930/31 in the volume of films being produced, the North had moved on. The production of silents dropped drastically, post the release of *Alam-Ara*, but the South although in its last legs, continued to make Silent films.

A successful venture up and until this point, A.Narayanan and his team, set out to make a film version of the popular novel 'Leila-The Star of Mingrelia', which had been published in London, in the 1850s. This story was written by one G.W.M.Reynolds, and the story was set in Georgia, in the Caucasus region of Russia. The film version made by A.Narayanan, was a mega budget film, and was shot and censored in 2 parts, totalling 20,000 feet. This was the only silent film in India, made and censored in two parts. By any means, it was the largest Silent film, made in India. For a perspective, *Vikathakumaran*, the popular silent film made by J.C.Daniel, which had been forgotten for decades and would come into the limelight only in the 1970s, measured only 7000 feet, in length.

Financial Bankruptcy of General Pictures Corporation - Contrary to popular opinion, 'Leila-The Star of Mingrelia' was a financial disaster, which broke the company's back. It turned out to be the last film, produced by the company, following which, the company faced liquidation.

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Conclusion and Connection to the Pamphlet: Years later in 2017, George Kalandia, professor of the Georgian art Museum, discovered a film pamphlet in London. It was one of 'Leila-The Star of Mingrelia', a story written by a **Briton** G.W.M.Reynolds, with the story setting in **Georgia**, a film version which was made in **Madras** , and financed by individuals from **Trichur**.

George Kalandia was kind enough to reply to this author's email on enquiry, and forwarded me to the London museum, to retrieve this pamphlet's details, but inspite of several communication attempts made to London enquiring about the pamphlet, continue to remain unanswered.

Silent Era film pamphlets - A well to do researcher/collector has confessed to this author in private, that he is in possession of about 400 pamphlets of the Indian Silent film era, which include 'Leila-The Star of Mingrelia', the pamphlet of our interest. But he informs the author that he wishes to write a 4 volume book, on the Silent film era, at an estimated budget of Rs.80 lakhs. Whether the author completes his mega budgeted project remains to be seen, but what won't be seen for sure by the public, is the pamphlet in his collection.

The same collector also concedes that rare Silent era film pamphlets like these continue to remain and be traded in private hands at exorbitant prices of 30,000-40,000 Rupees each. These collectors continue to hoard such material, and will likely not allow the digitization and sharing of such material, as they believe, it could diminish the commercial value of such material.

Unsolved Debates and Conclusion – Unlike Silent films made in the North, where there is some consensus around the release dates of the Silent films, there lingers some confusions around the time period, when the first films in South India were made. Nataraja Mudaliar's Keechaka Vatham produced in Madras(Vellore) continues to be the subject of much debate even today, regarding its release date, although Mudaliar himself has gone on record and said that the film was produced and released in 1916. A similar story exists for J.C.Daniel's Vikathakumaran, which continues to be a subject of debate, with some preferring to believe the timeline suggested by Chellangatt Gopalakrishnan, the journalist, who brought a forgotten Daniel into the limelight, decades later. He provides the year of release of 1928, while an unknown pamphlet, which has come into the light in recent years suggesting 1930. The root cause for these problems, is the *lack of dated convincing primary material – equally accessible to anyone, in the online space, which can help establish and build a consensus.*

So, the onus lies on institutions which are in possession of such material to digitize and bring not just pamphlets, but newspapers, books and other film media, to the online space. This will not only facilitate the challenging of incorrect information, the discovery of forgotten information, but will also allow smoother debates and critical thinking, and enable re-writing the history of our own past.

- Sugeeth Krishnamoorthy.